Twin Peaks, Season 3, Episodes 1-4: Sculpting in Time



Kyle MacLachlan in *Twin Peaks*

(Spoilers follow.) It's not surprising that David Lynch has a *lot* to get out of his artistic system after, effectively, 11 years of dormancy on the moving-image front. In interviews, Lynch has said that he thinks of this new "season" as an 18-hour movie "shown not in a big theater, but it's shown as cinema on television." Having slammed through four episodes in one night, I'd take him at his word: the tonal transition he accomplishes in that time is amplified when absorbed as one unit, and I suspect the final unveiled product will benefit from being viewed in as close to one single dose as practicality and comfort permits.

The first two episodes (spliced together into one two-hour unit for broadcast) are, from the get-go, emotionally severe and narratively oblique, akin to if *Berlin Alexanderplatz* had put its fever-dream epilogue right up front; there's a strong sense that Lynch is weeding out the weaklings, but he's not just being capriciously difficult. Putatively ambitious Quality TV still exists within the fairly narrow matrix of possibilities offered by serial narrative television, which leaves no room for formally abstract/non-narrative modes of pleasure. The series is 18 hours long, working from a script that was 400 pages long; doing the standard "1 page = 1 minute" math suggested long non-verbal stretches, which is precisely the case even as episodes three/four get, in relative terms, more "accessible." Having to answer to no one, Lynch drags TV away from dialogue and into gallery-land: each room and space has been exquisitely color-graded, each signature ominous room tone/bass rumble personally sound-designed by Lynch himself. Confounding doesn't necessarily mean patience-testing or boring, a conflation made even in many sympathetic reviews: it's a different kind of pleasure — scanning the frame, appreciating the tonalities,

listening closely — than TV viewers have been trained to accept or process. (I wish interviewers would stop their inevitably futile attempts to get Lynch to say something about his Meaning or Creative Process and simply lob tech queries at him; in his own obdurate, camera/medium-specific way, I suspect Lynch is as technologically conversant as David Fincher. Have a sound designer talk to him!)

Lynch almost immediately severs aesthetic continuity with the 35mm-originated original series: the theme is back, but it's not deployed immediately as the credits start. A helicopter shot of the forest is arrested, frame-left, by an intense halo of sun trying to punch through fog, a view held for, by television standards, a dangerously long time; no narrative info is being conveyed, it's just an image you're invited to contemplate. This isn't so different from the original's repeated pillow shot-esque cuts to, i.e., B-roll of a waterfall held for a long, dronily hypnotic length, but this is right up top while you wait for the familiar music to kick in. With a notable exception in episode four (which I'll get to further down), Lynch doesn't use any of the other old familiar cues, and what little other music Angelo Badalamenti has contributed is of the sustained note, ominous drone variety. Without that music to set the tone — which reliably cued viewers as to whether what they were watching was, for the moment at least, temporarily safe, or sure to turn ominous — performers exist in a sometimes uncomfortable void. The return of Ben and Jerry Horne, put up top, is a typical session of brotherly banter maintained 25 years on (chomping impatiently on his cigar, Richard Beymer has shades of late-period Letterman) but without the feeling, as if town residents had been trapped in a pathetic amber of reliving the same routines in Dale Cooper's absence. The dead air feeling eventually lifts, but here saps this early scene of nostalgic satiation in an austerely withholding way.

The first two episodes also reintroduce Dr. Lawrence Jacoby (Russ Tamblyn) in shots whose on-the-ground return to the woods are another visual disjuncture: no more soft light or murky darkness, but the hard clarity of unobscured sunlight. In very, very long shot, Jacoby receives the delivery of five shovels; later on, he meticulously spray-paints them gold on one side, then begins on the other. Lynch cuts away before the last two get that reverse coat, but the moment is still entirely process-driven — we might as well be watching the director himself at work on one of his innumerable multi-media projects, and the question of what the shovels are for, while not unintriguing, is entirely irrelevant to the pleasure of watching this scene. That Lynch introduces a handheld shot from further away of Jacoby in the first sequence, suggesting per usual Something Watching In The Woods, then refuses to make anything of it, lends the scene some potential narrative charge, but that's not the primary experience being offered here.

Is Lynch an experimental filmmaker forcing himself to work within narrative confines? I'm sympathetic to the argument, but it's clear that there's something about the narrative form

(no matter how much he deranges it) that's useful for him. E.g., the much-discussed "glass box" sequence, unfolding in a very abstract idea of a NYC loft that's all shades of dark yellow and burnished browns. (There's an affinity here with the similar signature basement spaces of Kiyoshi Kurosawa, one of the very few filmmakers whose ability to also access the unexplained uncanny makes him legitimately "Lynchian.") Lynch introduces a solitary man who proceeds, for minutes at a time, to sit blankly and/or set up gear (within a space that's pretty much exactly a fixed-perspective installation); we're getting the vague outlines of narrative information, but again, it's not the priority. He cuts back and forth between the window view to outside and the lone dude as if the former were HAL 9000's unblinking eye. Lots of reviews have also picked up on the obvious TV-tweaking going on here — stare and wait in vain for narrative info! — although I wonder if Lynch is snidely glossing J.J. Abrams' "mystery box" concept. (And when you stare at the tube waiting for some kind of easily legible meaning, you're missing the point and might as well get killed, apparently.) For Abrams, the mystery box is the Macguffin driving an otherwise familiar plot; Lynch offers up actual mystery. More meta-tweaking from a guy much noted for his soundbite on how watching movies on an iPhone is a "sadness" in episode three, when secretary Lucy fumes about how much she hates cellphones. Lynch may tend towards abstraction, but he's not above these kinds of personal, petty digs: the last episode of *Twin Peaks* v.1 is the most spiteful possible response to ABC's cancellation.

After that pilot — whose immediately coherent, Matthew Lillard-as-murderer thread and a few other linear items feel like they take less time than the severe and prolonged abstraction; the connection is made with *Inland Empire*'s scratchy record player, with a gramophone deployed in a nightmare charcoal-gray room somewhere in the Black Lodge — I admire that episode three actually doubles down on the synoptically unarticulable horror for an extended period before finally swinging into something like clear narrative gear. (In passing, I also greatly admired the palpably un-CGI-aided car crash, complete with one of the only non-embarrassing uses of GoPro from the dashboard view.)

Over episodes three and four, two things generally happen: the tone gets markedly lighter and funnier as the narrative becomes clearer. Even the still-abstract opening sequence is, at least momentarily, lighter: when Cooper stops falling through space and lands on some kind of concrete balcony, the camera beats him there, waiting patiently until he lands with a funnily unceremonious thunk. The music is still largely absent, but the characters start to come to more comfortable life and Lynch opens up the throttle on the pace a little bit. Over the course of four hours, he's given the opportunity to explore, quite thoroughly, one interconnected formal/tonal pocket, and then dive in in depth into another, and the gear-shift is quite thrilling. Lynch has always been inclined to durational filmmaking, in the sense of holding many of his shots at great, uninterrupted length (the

overhead introduction of the delivery truck arriving at Dr. Jacoby's place is a relative of the super-slow crane down introducing Richard Farnsworth's house in *The Straight Story*). These four episodes get at a different kind of durational filmmaking: what Lynch seems to have figured out is that he can use 18 hours to explore whole sustained moods that, in his films, are normally/necessarily jammed up against each other, with their signature whiplash between rude if sometimes unsettling comedy and pure horror. Now he has the time and space to go all-in on these different modes, a far different use of TV running time than the twining and untwining of multiple narrative threads or accretion of writerly character detail.

Given how successful this marathon view was, I'm not sure I want to commit to weekly episode write-ups; these seem best to contemplate in aggregate form. For now, I'll note that the trajectory Good Cooper enters once re-entering the real world is a combination of *E.T.* and *Starman*, where his memory-wiped vocabulary is limited to only the words he hears and his actions purely imitative. The tone is goofy and a little delightful, even taking the time to plant an obvious plot point; Cooper relearning his signature thumbs-up is an obvious precursor to a hitchhiking road trip back, finally, to Twin Peaks. He's being guided by some kind of providence which sets him up for victory at the casino; like a more extremely innocent version of MacLachlan himself in *Blue Velvet* or Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive*, Cooper is now a moral blank slate capable of being sculpted into good or evil. The majority of Lynch's characters have generally been fixed as Good or Evil agents from the get-go; here we'll see the shaping of a whole consciousness, and where it lands could lead to Lynch's most optimistic or despairing conclusion.

In episode four we also get our first slip back into the show's old mode, as grown-up Bobby (Dana Ashbrook) sees a photo of Laura Palmer and starts losing it in teary-eyed close-up while an old music cue plays. Such moments — in which an excess of pure emotion is musically tempered by Badalamenti's synth-bound score, serving as a kind of tinkly distancing device — are sometimes seen as purely serious, by others as ironic. I'm not at all convinced that laughter is precluded or disrespectful; it's possible for something to be sincere and knowingly ridiculous at once, the same way Sirk can be impossible to tonally fix. The collision between the newly-established, lean-and-mean mode of the show and this momentary regression is startling, as if the new Cooper had to make his way back to a town trapped in a moment from 25 years ago to synthesize the two different narrative methods. Is this kind of presentational self-consciousness part of Lynch's agenda? Who knows, but the final pre-song segment of episode four — a long dialogue exchange between Lynch's Agent Gordon Cole and the late Miguel Ferrer's Albert — plays out under a ridiculously color-corrected smothering shade of blue, for reasons that remain inexplicable until the final verbal punchline, which invokes the color itself (one Lynch banned from use on the show's first season, no less) as part of a plotine that

serves as a reflexive retroactive explanation. That’s new for Lynch, and anything seems possible going forward.